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**Philosophical Papers**

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SECOND SERIES, No. 3.

Lessing on the Boundaries of Poetry and Painting.

BY

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## ON SOME POINTS IN LESSING'S LAOCOON.

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BY PROFESSOR E. L. WALTER.

It would be possible, in talking of the Laocoon, to touch on almost every phase of criticism, both in literature and art, without wandering from the subject, so discursive is Lessing, so multifarious are the subjects of his thought, so suggestive is everything he says. In fact, aside from the interest and importance of his subject matter, this suggestiveness and discursiveness are Lessing's principal charms. We seem to see a powerful mind at work; and it is always one of the most instructive as well as one of the most attractive of experiences, to see how such a mind arrives at its conclusions, especially when, as is the case here, all is clothed in a literary style of supreme charm. I shall discuss only that which is the chief subject of the Laocoon, indicated by the sub-title, "On the limits of poetry and painting," and shall deal only with one part of the argument even on this subject.

It should be said at the outset that the Laocoon is only a fragment, like most of Lessing's work; in this he resembled him whom we must regard upon the whole as the greatest of his French contemporaries, Diderot, for whom Lessing entertained a hearty admiration and esteem. There is no doubt that if he had published a second part, he would have modified some of his statements, and that some of the best-founded objections to his theories would

have been treated acutely and candidly, as he treated all dissidents from his views who were not moved by mere ignorance or malice. Herder and Moses Mendelssohn were not men like Pastor Goeze, to be treated with that savage scorn which immortalized its object. The notes he left for the continuation of his *Laocoon* show clearly enough what every student was quite ready to believe, that he would have met every fair objection in the same spirit which prompted it.

The argument of the *Laocoon*, stripped of its illustrations and digressions, can be stated briefly. It is in two parts, the argument from the study of the master-pieces in poetry and painting, and the argument from abstract principles, the argument *a priori*, with part of the second of which only I shall deal.

He finds that the test of good poetry set up by some critics, i. e., whether it can be transferred to canvass, fails singularly when applied. Some of the most admirable poetry in the world lends itself very sparingly to illustration by the painter, and some of the most beautiful pictures in the world are of scenes which are left untouched by the very poet who, if this principle were true, would naturally describe them at length. Furthermore, when poets have tried apparently to paint so that painters can follow them, they have failed in giving even remotely such an idea of what they try to paint, as would be given by a single glance at the treatment of the same subject by a painter or sculptor; on the other hand, a painter who should try to put on canvass what a poet has successfully painted, would fail as miserably. Again, we do not like to see a painting of an ugly person or even of a beautiful person whose beauty has been defaced by a disfiguring emotion, while in poetry the violent emotions which disfigure have

inspired many most admirable and effective passages, and even plain persons may become objects of most passionate admiration. Whence comes all this ? Evidently from the difference in the aim of painting and poetry, and this depends upon the means at command of either art. Painting deals with stationary imitation, poetry with progressive imitation. Accept this and all is explained.

But he reaches the same result when he tries to deduce his conclusions without regard to masterpieces in the arts. There must indisputably be a suitable relation between the signs used in the arts and the things signified. Now painting uses figures and colors in space, poetry articulate sounds in time ; hence signs which are coexistent in space, like colors and figures, can properly express only things which coexist in space, and signs which follow each other in time, like articulate tones, can properly express only things which follow each other in time. Painting, therefore, can represent only bodies, actions only as these bodies exist in time, and may change in appearance every moment of their existence ; poetry, therefore, can represent only actions, bodies only as these actions are connected with certain bodies which exist in space. He says that this dry chain of reasoning (I have abbreviated it considerably) would not be so convincing to him, if he did not find it confirmed by the practice of Homer, or rather if it had not been the practice of Homer which suggested it.

Of course no mere outline, such as I have given, can do justice to the argument, but what is lacking is rather the felicity, the precision and the force of expression, than the substance of the argument itself ; it is rather the wide range of illustration, the acute discussion of subsidiary questions which have only an indirect bearing upon the general question, the total impression of vigor and in-



sight which force themselves upon the attention of every reader and suggest perhaps a more binding power in the argument than a close analysis shows. There has been no lack of close analysis of the Laocoon nor of far-reaching objections. Every position which Lessing has taken in it has been denied by all sorts and conditions of men, his judgment on isolated questions, as well as the general principles he seeks to establish. Art, archæology, literary criticism, textual criticism, the principles of interpretation, authority, philosophy, ingenuity and stupidity, malice and prejudice, have all in turn been directed against him, by men who differ as widely in temper and sense as Herder and Herr Klotz, in intellectual attitude as Moses Mendelssohn and Vischer.

It cannot be denied that much has been pointed out which is actually wrong in fact, much which is faulty in argument or defective in statement, much that is doubtful in judgment, but the main position which he sought to establish has, in my opinion, only been strengthened by the subsequent discussion, the position, namely, that the proper province of poetry is the description of actions, of painting and sculpture the representation of bodies ; that, poets should describe only sparingly and in connection with actions, that painters should paint actions only so far as bodies can indicate them.

The errors of fact pointed out in Lessing's essay are almost exclusively due to defective information, for which he can not be blamed. This is especially true in archæology, where errors of fact are most abundant ; in nearly every case, his statements were either true in his day, having been proved false only by subsequent discoveries, or he had never had access to original sources of information, in which case he is certainly excusable. Not

an error of fact of any importance has, I think, been pointed out in the whole essay where a similar excuse cannot be offered.

As to the other kinds of errors, those which critics have imagined they have found are partly matters in which there may fairly be a difference of opinion, and the rest can be attributed to a fact that should never be forgotten in any criticism of the *Laocoon*, viz.: that Lessing was the first to set himself deliberately to consider the question here discussed. Now it would be indeed strange if in the first discussion of so complicated a question, into the solution of which must of necessity enter so largely individual impressions, which depends so largely upon the comparison of so many isolated and widely separated facts,—it would be indeed strange if no weakness were found. For Lessing had no predecessor in this discussion; the most careful research has been able to find nothing of any importance bearing on the subject directly except a few paragraphs or sections in books on allied subjects. It is possible, of course, that the main position taken in the *Laocoon* was suggested by one of these isolated utterances, but besides the impossibility of proving any such thing, it would scarcely impair the originality of the essay, even if proved, for in any case all the developments are Lessing's own.

In discussing before a philosophical society questions of high criticism, I have, I trust, a becoming sense of modesty. I have no consistent and far-reaching theory of æsthetics to depend on, but shall be guided chiefly by a quality which is rather hard to define accurately, which, I believe, has never done anything of great consequence in philosophy, but which, I venture to think, has not infrequently come to right results by wrong methods, not only

in everyday matters, but also in in the more delicate and difficult matters of speculation. This quality, which every one assumes himself to have, is common sense, reinforced in this case by opinions which are pretty firmly held, even if feebly supported by reason. Moreover, most of what I shall say will not call for the exercise of much beyond the power of understanding and reporting what others say ; I lay claim to nothing but a fairly good acquaintance with some of the more important discussions on the subject which have appeared since 1766, the date of the first publication of the *Laocoon*.

It is fortunately not necessary for me to define what is meant by poetry. It is sufficient to point out the greater elasticity of the term in ordinary use, as contrasted with painting and sculpture on one hand and prose on the other. A miserable daub in a country inn is a painting as well as a portrait by Titian or Velasquez ; that amazing statue in Washington in which the horse forever stands on one hind leg, is as much a statue as the immortal Venus of Milo or the glorious Dionysus of Praxiteles. So also very few of us would be surprised as was Molière's M. Jourdain, at learning that we had been talking prose all our lives ; what we say is as certainly prose as the splendid periods of Burke or the heavily-weighted phrases of Carlyle. But the term poetry is elastic enough to allow some cultivated persons to speak of the poetry of Martin Farquhar Tupper, at which other cultivated persons laugh scornfully ; or a very different case from this—a large, intelligent, cultivated and not illiberal body of persons assert that Walt Whitman's poetry is not poetry at all, but consists mainly of what he himself calls *barbaric yelps*, while another body of readers, smaller to be sure, but whose intelligence is just as penetrating, whose culture is just as broad, pronounce these

same *yauws* the highest that America has yet produced in poetry.

As for me, I confess that I am unable to find any absolute distinction between prose and poetry but meter ; this is the only thing that poetry must have which prose may not have. All the rest, passion, sentiment, fancy, imagination, elevation, purity, ardor, the power of inspiring a love for whatever is good and true, everything else that is generally called poetical can be found and is often found in prose. This is the case even with figures of speech ; orate prose often contains as much figurative language, as many similies and metaphors, as many transpositions, as many subtleties of expression as are found in most poetry. An abundance of such ornament is certainly less objectionable in ordinary poetry than in ordinary prose, but much of the most effective poetry is as destitute of it as the plainest prose. It is certainly not the presence of bold imagery and splendid figures of speech that distinguishes Wordsworth's poetry from Burke's prose.

Again, the value of the best poetry would be lessened, to be sure, but by no means destroyed, if it were turned into harmonious prose ; it is the pleasure the ear receives from the regular or skillfully irregular recurrence of the metrical accent which gives a poem its only advantage over harmonious prose expressing the same thoughts. The only important exception to this, and that only an apparent one, is the case of lyric poetry, and not even all of this ; it is only the great song-writers, Burns, Shakspeare, Goethe, Heine, Béranger, Hugo, who defy all attempts to reproduce in prose any considerable part of the effect of their songs. But this is only another proof of the supreme importance of form, of meter ; the music of the verse, the effect of this music upon the reader, is all or nearly all,

the content is a minimum, there is nothing or next to nothing said, the effect upon us is not unlike that which would be produced, if, without understanding the words, we should hear them exquisitely sung, set to appropriate music. But the greater part of even lyric poetry, narrative, religious, panegyric, can be paraphrased without losing more than would be abundantly explained by the absence of meter.

But as far as Lessing's argument is concerned, or at all events that portion of it which I shall consider, the presence or absence of meter is of no moment, and I need not inquire what else besides meter goes to make up poetry. It is to be regretted, I think, that usage is not more consistent in making a distinction between poetry and verse, a distinction which we all recognize in theory, though we might find it difficult accurately to define and separate the two terms. But we are all careless in the use of them, and even sometimes speak contemptuously of poetry, when we mean verse. And we are at times so offended by the unreality of much that is written by the average poet, who is compelled by the necessities of rhyme and meter to say what he does not believe, and what would not be worth saying if he did, that we turn with a sense of relief to writing where flabby thought and false sentiment and ineptitudes of styles are perhaps as frequent, but are certainly less offensive, when not brought into greater prominence by rhyme and meter. This, I think, is at the bottom of most of the sneers in which well-meaning men indulge, when they choose to call poetical whatever is remote from common interests and common sense. For certainly no man with even a moderate capacity for feeling the loftier emotions, would sneer at the imagination which sees, the heart which glows, the intelligence which compre-

hends, the passion which vivifies, accompanied by the appropriateness and beauty of expression, which are found in every great poet, where he is most a poet.

At all events, everything not in meter, unless some of Walt Whitman's work be excepted, is prose, and in what I shall say, I shall wish to have prose included as well as poetry.

The first serious criticism of the Laocoon was by Herder, then a young man of twenty-five. His criticisms are desultory and disfigured by those defects of style and artistic finish which will make his genius practically unknown to all but the professed student; but he shows already those fine qualities of head and heart, enthusiasm, independence, candor, fearlessness, which make his name so important in German literary history, and his figure so interesting to lovers of that literature. In the criticism of detailed points he is often wrong; patience, caution in coming to a conclusion were never his strong qualities. But his criticism of the abstract portion of the argument, where Lessing apparently thinks himself to have demonstrated his position, is substantially that of most of those who have dealt with the question since.

Lessing's argument assumes that the relation between words and poetry is the same which exists between color and outline and painting, and this assumption Herder attempts to overthrow, as I think, successfully.

Signs must have a convenient relation to the thing signified, says Lessing. However true this may be in painting, it is certainly open to grave doubt in poetry. Language, whatever its origin, has reached a point where it conveys no meaning to him who has not previously learned what meaning is attributed to it by others. If this were not so, if our knowledge of language came by nature, as

does that of color and outline, it would not be necessary to study Greek or Italian to understand Homer or Dante. We do not need an interpreter to understand, in a general way, what a picture by Raphael or a marble by Praxiteles represents, but one who does not understand Italian would not know, except from the intonation or expression, on hearing a passage from the *Paradiso*, whether it was a comic poem or a love song. Words are to be sure a *conditio sine qua non* in poetry, that is, a limitation to the poet, but they are not his instruments as are his ideas, as are to the painter figures and colors.

There is a natural relation between the painted scene upon canvas and the actual scene in real life; if there is any relation between the printed or spoken words of a poem and the ideas which it conveys, it is so remote that it may safely be disregarded; in the one case, the signs are natural, founded in the nature of the thing represented; in the other they are conventional, and could just as well refer to entirely different objects. The nature of the signs in the two arts is therefore wholly different and the *tertium comparationis* disappears.

Again, succession of tones is not in poetry what co-existence of figures and colors is in painting. The very foundation of painting, the very thing that makes it possible, is the coexistence of objects in space; that which is so large that only one part can be seen, or so small that its parts can not be seen, can not be beautiful and can not be painted. We can not conceive a painting which does not represent coexistent objects or coexistent parts of one object. But in poetry the fact that the words succeed each other, contributes little or nothing to constituting the poem, in the same way that the juxtaposition of figures and colors on canvas constitutes the painting; it becomes

a poem only because of the ideas which we have arbitrarily attached to the words, and if those ideas could be suggested by any other means than by words, the poem would remain just as beautiful as before, except in so far as the mere music of the *rhythm* contributes to the effect. //

This will be plainer when that art is considered in which succession in time does correspond to coexistence in space in painting. Already before the *Laocoon* was published, Moses Mendelssohn had suggested that music was the art which, more properly than poetry, could be compared with painting in this respect; for to the signs of poetry conventional meanings have been given, which enable it to express existing things in space without trenching upon the domain of painting. In fact, music *is* movement. We can no more conceive of music without succession in time, of stationary music, than of a painting whose different parts appear and disappear successively. This is true not only of melody but is true of harmony as well. The most delicious chord, if prolonged without change, becomes monotonous, and would not even be music, would be a mere noise, without a consciousness of the rhythmic pulse; and the finest effects are precisely those which are the conspicuous result of change from discord to harmony.

Herder seems to me to be completely successful in this part of his argument; words are not to poetry what figures and colors are to painting. The foundation is tottering; he asks, how as to the superstructure?

Painting works in space, music in time, but poetry through energy; this is the essence of poetry, not either coexistence or succession. Now, the working of this energy cannot be confined to either medium alone, it must work in both; it certainly works in space, for it brings the



object conceived before the soul, the fancy *sees* it; it works in time, for it works through speech; and builds a whole through successive representations of the parts. The fancy must see that which happens in succession of of time. It must be the constant object of poetry to paint, but this must be done under the limitations imposed by the instruments used, that is, words.

Whether or not we accept Herder's view as to what constitutes the essence of poetry, it is well to point out that he does not differ so much from Lessing on the main question as one might be tempted to suppose. The practical objections brought by Lessing to descriptions in poetry remain as serious as before. How do we get a clear conception of a thing in space, he asks? By considering first, the parts, then their union, then the whole, but this is done with such astonishing rapidity that it seems to us to be but one operation. But even if the single parts could be well described by the slow process of words, when the last part is completed, we have forgotten the first, and the whole escapes, unless by a laborious effort of reconstruction, during which the picture vanishes. Here Lessing points to the chief difficulty in describing objects by words. For him, as for Herder, the poet *must* paint, and precisely for that reason he must never describe. There must be poetical painting, but in order that the enumeration of details, as Victor Hugo puts it, may not pulverize in the mind of the reader the image of the whole, and because painting in words can never produce that degree of illusion which alone deserves such a name, the poet must never describe.

What is left to the poet then? Evidently to describe successively what the eye sees successively, that is, actions. It is plain, as Herder points out, that succession alone can not constitute an action, there must be some bond between

the different moments and objects of succession, and that is *Kraft*, energy, moreover there must be an end proposed, and a consciousness in the actors. An aimless, consciousness succession of the same bodies could not be an action in any literary sense, though modern novel-writing seems drifting that way.

An action thus defined seems therefore a preeminently fit subject for poetical treatment; is it the only fit subject? Herder rhetorically exclaims, "I shudder at the streams of blood that must flow from old and new poets, if Lessing's sentence is to be carried out. Pindar and Anacreon, Catullus and Horace must be sacrificed, Milton and Klopstock mutilated." It is impossible that Lessing would have accepted for a moment the conclusion which Herder thus thrusts upon him. It is known definitely that he was an admirer of some of these poets, and it can not be supposed that he would have denied them or to lyric poets generally the name of poets.

The explanation is twofold, and is contained partly in a marginal note of Mendelssohn's to the original sketch of the Laocoon, partly in an utterance of Lessing himself. Mendelssohn says that objects which follow each other and which by Lessing's definition are the only fit subjects for poetry, should be called movements rather than actions. There are actions which are composed of several parts juxtaposed in space, the so-called collective actions, and these are fit subjects for painting. Now, lyric poetry is emphatically movement, it expresses all the movements of the soul, pleasure, pain, love, hate, joy, sorrow, and hence even on Lessing's theory need not be denied the name of poetry. Lessing himself has said nothing, so far as I know, which would suggest this interpretation of his rule, but it is in agreement with his argument and is entirely reasonable.

But more important than this is what Lessing himself says in a letter written a few years after the publication of the *Laocoon*. His argument, he says, has reference to poetry only in its highest forms, and these are dramatic and epic poetry, the former because in it the conventional signs of poetry approach nearest to nature, the latter, from which he draws most of his illustrations, because it is broader, more widely applicable than lyric poetry, appeals more to the universal mind.

Lessing seems to me, in thus leaving lyric poetry out of the account, to hint at one of the weaknesses of contemporary poetry, as well as of the poetry of his day. Lyric poetry is taking an undue place in poetical literature to-day, for at the best, it is one-sided, and at the worst, it is perverted. The whole body of a nation's lyric poetry, as Hegel says, may give a fair idea of its interests and its feelings, but any single poem or any single poet has necessarily a contracted range. Moreover, in epic and dramatic poetry, emotion, which is the very foundation of lyric poetry, is subordinated to what all must recognize as something higher. The fashionable craze for Shelley, who has in my opinion very slight merits outside of his lyrics, the great respect with which the lyric spasms of Swinburne are treated by the best critics, the almost absolute dearth for forty years of anything valuable in German poetry except lyrics, seem to me to augur ill for the immediate future of poetry. What reconciles me largely to the present somewhat factitious enthusiasm over Browning, is that he at least has not confined himself to lyric shrieks, but has put his best work in dramatic and what may fairly be called epic poetry. This goes far to make amends for the gross defects of form which mar the fine qualities of him who, all deductions made, must be pronounced, I

think, the greatest living poet. But this is aside from my purpose. I only wished to show that Lessing did not intend to deny to the lyric poet his title of poet, and that he had good reason not to mention them specially.

Besides actions then, the emotions of the heart are fit subjects for poetry. It has been shown, Lessing himself admits, that the fact that words succeed each other does not prevent prose from describing objects in space, only this should not be done in poetry, because words can not present a picture to the fancy, and the fancy should always see what the poet describes. Must a poet then never describe? It is a pity that Lessing has not further developed a remark in his notes for the continuation of the Laocoon. It was the practice of Homer, he says, that brought him to his conclusions. Now in the *Odyssey* are two passages, each of considerable length, which describe, one the palace, the other the garden of Alcinous. Lessing finds new confirmation for his position in these passages, how is not quite clear. He seems to mean, however, that Homer did not intend here to give a picture of the palace and garden, but only to rouse in the minds of his hearers the notion of something grand and mysterious.

So then, not only the prose writer can describe, but the poet may describe when he does not seek to paint. Nothing is finer and more just than this observation. But how many instances are there in the better poets of descriptions pure and simple? The very passage which he quotes from Ariosto to condemn it could be defended perhaps on this very ground. If the poet supposed that anyone could see his Alcina from his description, then it is certainly a lamentable failure. But if he only wishes to impress upon the reader the vague fact that she was extra-

ordinarily beautiful, he is successful, and the only fault to be found is one of which he is not seldom guilty in his descriptions of actions also, that is, diffuseness. The passage from Haller, too, fails to give us the picture Lessing demands of it, but who shall say whether he wishes to give us more than a pleasantly vague notion of a flower-decked heath? To be sure, in so far as vagueness is a fault, this would be no excuse. Whether the poet is justified in frequently neglecting to paint in order to accomplish something else, is another question. Lessing thinks not, and most readers of taste now-a-days will agree with him, but even this concession sensibly relaxes the vigor of his principles. It is a great way from saying that poets can not describe, to saying that poets should not describe frequently.

But even this Lessing seems to fear is too rigorous. If visible nature is to be entirely closed to imitation of the poet, his realm is contracted enormously; is there no way by which this can be remedied without violating the law that Lessing has laid down? The sections in which Lessing answers this questions are admirable examples of wise and discriminating criticism. His examples are drawn, as usual, chiefly from Homer, but they could be multiplied almost at will from most of the other poets of the first rank and indeed from most poets of any rank. All poets have practised these devices for overcoming the difficulty of describing in words, and few or none knew that it was a device even; they were simply not satisfied with bald description, and found something better. Lessing was the first to show why it was better, and this was an immense service to criticism.

He observes that if Homer wishes to keep our attention fixed on some object, he places it in a succession of

moments, in each of which it appears different, as, for example, when Hebe puts together the chariot of Juno, or when Agamemnon puts on his garments successively, or when the poet tells the story of Agamemnon's or Achilles' scepter or of Pandarus' bow. Herder objects that this is no more a picture of the object than a bald description would be. But Herder misconceives what Lessing attributes to this device. He is consistent throughout; words can not give a vivid picture of an object, through this device of Homer's as little as by simple description. Poetry must in the very nature of things fall short in this respect of what nature can accomplish. What is effected, is that our attention is kept fastened upon the object to be described, and without knowing it we form finally a picture more or less vague, but as near to the distinctness of a picture as is at all possible in words.

So with the shield of Achilles; the god-like workman steps up to the anvil with hammer and tongs, and he strikes, the pictures swell out on the shield, and the battle scene, the trial in the market-place, the reapers harvesting, are acted in Homer's verse as they could never have been upon the shield, and round all flows old Oceanus. So Anacreon has Bathyllus painted before our eyes, and the hair, the brows, the cheeks, the mouth, come successively into his verse, as they would have been painted successively on the canvas, thus constituting an action.

Homer, who does not paint bodily beauty, gives us nevertheless an idea of Helen's beauty such as no painter could give. When the elders of Troy sat upon the gates and saw Helen coming to them, they exclaimed, "No wonder that the Trojans and the well-greaved Greeks suffer woes so long a time for the sake of so fair a woman as she!"

What could give a more vivid idea of Helen's beauty, asks Lessing, than that old age itself recognizes it as well worth the war which had cost so many tears and so much blood? He paints her beauty by its effects upon the beholders. So Milton paints Eve's beauty by its effects upon Satan, and Goethe paints Dorothea's by its effects upon the pastor and Hermann's parents. Somewhat similar to this, but dealing rather with natural than bodily beauty, is the celebrated description of Dover cliffs in *King Lear*, where immense height is suggested by merely telling how the apparent size of objects is diminished, and of the dreadful dangers of those who work there. Analogous to this again is the device which has been carried to excess by modern novelists, but is none the less often very effective, the description of scenery by its effects upon the mind. A gloomy wood, a smiling lake, a green meadow, a barren plain, can probably be presented to the fancy as well as by noting the tranquilizing or depressing effect upon a mind open to such influences as by any other means at the command of writers.

Lessing mentions one more device by which the difficulty of describing in words is evaded; the poet may change beauty into charm. Charm is beauty in motion, and for that very reason less suitable for the painter, who must in the attempt to represent it make permanent that which from its very nature is transitory, while with the poet it remains what it is. Lessing is said to have been the first, if not to give this definition of charm, at least to introduce it into æsthetics. Whatever its value there, it is certainly valuable in explaining, without contradicting Lessing's theory, the effectiveness of many passages which seem at first purely descriptive. The eyes which glance, the mouth which smiles, the bosom which heaves, are what the painter

at the best can only indicate to the eye, but which the poet presents to the fancy.

But a similar device is effective with those objects which can not have charm, which are motionless or practically so. Not to speak of waving fields of grain, or the swaying foliage of trees, even the grand features of a landscape can be described in this way. The classic illustration of this is the description of the farm of Hermann's father in *Hermann and Dorothea* ; the young man leaves his parents in vexation, and when his mother goes to seek him, the description of her walk is at the same time the description of the farm. So Schiller's poem, *The Walk*, consists almost solely of natural scenery described in this way, interwoven with reflections on man and society, which give it an aim and preserve it from the appearance of triviality.

Again, the use of one or two descriptive epithets is not only open to no objection, it is from every point of view to be advised. It is easy to see what advantage a writer can draw from this in the course of a tale or poem of considerable length, to suggest a picture of a person or scene. Not every author thinks it worth while apparently to do this ; we learn, as it seems, only casually from Homer that Helen had white arms and beautiful hair. But for one who does care, how easy is it, by the constant iteration of two or three epithets, to create in the mind of every reader an image as vivid as words are capable of, without any description at all. The personal appearance of Jane Eyre is more familiar to the readers of her autobiography than that of Alcina to the readers of Ariosto, and Jane Eyre is not described once, while forty lines are spent in painting the beauty of Alcina. The plains around Troy are more vivid to the lovers of Homer than Loch Katrine can be to most of us, though the



Trojan plains are known to us only from the memorable and heroic struggles between Hector and Achilles, Sarpedon and Patroclus, while the Scotch lake is described to us with great minuteness.

It will be observed that all these devices for description mentioned, except the last, and I venture to say all others that could be mentioned, have this in common, that they introduce the element of succession into that which is coexistent. The number of such descriptions in the better poets, whether or not they may be supposed to have thought on the abstract nature of their art, is so large, the number of bald descriptions is so small, that this alone would suggest the substantial truth of Lessing's position, whatever we may think of the argument that sustains it. Even among the so-called descriptive poets, those passages which seem most likely to live, as for example the description of the thunder-storm in Thompson's *Seasons*, are only additional illustrations of his thesis. I know of no descriptions, pure and simple, in literature, which command an approximately unanimous admiration from competent judges. The judicious reader generally skips the descriptions in Walter Scott's novels, and I doubt if a description of that sort can be found in Ruskin; certainly the most famous passages contain excellent examples of the use of some one or more of the devices I have mentioned already. At the same time it is important, in our criticism of single passages, to remember what Lessing himself cautions us against. The description of a flower, he says, may perhaps be read and enjoyed, when we have the flower in hand, but alone it says little or nothing; the poet is there, but the flower is not.

So an absolute failure as a description may be admirable for various other reasons. The mere music of the

verse, the beauty of single epithets or single lines, the reflections, perhaps profound and beautiful, scattered throughout the verse, special familiarity with what is described, which makes it easier to call up the image, the singular skill shown by the poet in trying to do what after all can not be done, or even the great popularity of the poet or poem, an influence from which even the best of us can not be sure that we are free,—one or more of these things may make us admire what either should not be admired at all, or in any case admired for some other reason than that it gives a picture of what it attempts to describe. We must remember, too, that no one can object to a line or two of description, and that even Lessing seems to admit that a poet may describe when he does not seek to paint.

For my part, I have never seen a poetical description which could not be brought under some one of these heads, unless it were one indeed which would have to be condemned on all grounds of taste. The examples to the contrary which are brought forward by the text-books of rhetoric which touch on this subject at all, are generally illustrations of what Lessing does not deny. The description of the butterfly in Spenser is certainly beautiful verse; does any one think it would be possible to form even a remote conception of what a butterfly is from these lines? The gardener's daughter in Tennyson is certainly a beautiful and graceful creature, but she is also an admirable example of charm, of beauty in motion. Wordsworth's sonnet, "Earth hath not anything to show more fair," is a wonderful picture of tranquil beauty, but if a hundred painters should paint the scene from the sonnet alone, their pictures would not be recognized as having the same subject even, they would be a hundred different pictures.

There is a very characteristic passage in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, in which Lessing defends himself against those who accuse him of suppressing genius. "Rules suppress genius! they cry out, as if genius could be suppressed by anything in the world, and especially by that which is drawn from itself. Not every critic is a genius, but every genius is a born critic. He has the test of all rules in himself. He understands and retains and follows only those which express his feelings in words. Talk subtly with him about them as much as you please; he understands you only in so far as he recognizes the application of your general principles that moment to a particular case, and he remembers only that particular case." Now, as I have said, I doubt if a single example of description, pure and simple, can be found in literature which the majority of competent readers will admire. But if such a case be found, it will probably need no explanation; it will seem easy and natural; the problem will be solved, as Columbus solved the problem of the egg, with unpretentious simplicity.

It may perhaps be asked whether, if there are so many ways by which the impossibility of painting in words can be evaded, it is worth while to lay down the principle at all. But a little reflection will show how groundless is the doubt expressed. In the first place, it is always well to establish a sound general principle, even if the application is difficult from the numerous exceptions, especially when, as I have shown is the case here, the exceptions themselves can all be brought under one general law. Moreover, the exceptions, though numerous absolutely, are relatively few, and not every one can make use of them. To change coexistence in space into succession in time, though obvious and natural when we see it done by Shakespeare

or Goethe, is more difficult for the average writer than would be a description which does not describe. The genius to be sure does not need to have pointed out to him whatever of truth is contained in Lessing's law, but, to quote a simile from Lessing, as the crutch helps the lame man to go from one place to another, but can not make him a swift runner, so the exposition of this law may help the mediocre poet, who is sure to exist in spite of gods and men and the columns of booksellers, to be a little less tedious, and may help the average reader to a keener appreciation of the supreme beauty of the great poets, and this is a result not to be despised.

Certainly the immediate result on the literature of Germany was marked. Goethe has told us of the delight with which he, then a young man of seventeen, studying at Leipzig, read Lessing's speculations, and there can be no doubt that he was largely influenced by them in his poetical growth. The school of descriptive poets, which had grown up chiefly through the efforts of the Swiss Bodmer and Breitinger, to be one of the great literary powers of the day in Germany, and which took for its foundation principle the duty of poets to paint, did not survive the publication of the *Laocoon*. Wieland alludes humorously to its influence in a passage in which, about to enter into a description of a wood and stream, he suddenly bethinks himself that Lessing will be after him, and abruptly breaks off. Of course, descriptions can be found still which flatly run against all the principles laid down in the *Laocoon*, but there seems to be little probability that these poems will long survive the lifetime of their authors. There is one striking exception to this however.

As I have said, Lessing's argument, as far as it is valid at all, applies to all prose which is primarily meant for

recreation, as well as to verse. Now Walter Scott and his followers in the beginning of this century, describe minutely in their novels the scenes in which the action is chiefly laid, and Scott's novels, at least, are likely to live as long as any novels of this century. It needs, however, no great experience in literary matters to see that it is precisely those descriptions which most endanger the reputation of his novels. It is the acute observation of life and manners, the vivid and sympathetic delineation of character, it is *Jeanie Deans* and *Rebecca* and *Di Vernon*, it is *Baillie Jarvis* and *Monkbarns*, it is the numerous pictures of progressive actions, the burning of the *Tolbooth* in *Edinburgh*, the scene with the smugglers, the tournament, the attack on the castle as seen by *Rebecca*, and the multitude of other scenes like them which make us willing to overlook the tediousness of the descriptions. So in his poetry, scenes like that of the chase in the *Lady of the Lake*, help us to bear the descriptions of natural scenery, which are, however, not so numerous nor so detailed as in his prose.

It is perhaps worth while to inquire into the bearing upon this question of the undoubtedly wide-spread popularity of such descriptions in various periods. Popularity is no sure test of high merit, but even as a test is not to be despised. It is beyond a doubt that the descriptions in Walter Scott's novels, tedious as they are to-day to most readers, were once looked upon as great embellishments to the story. Why then are they not justified? I hold that they were justified. In art, whatever may be the case in morals, the end justifies the means, and if the cultivated men for whom Scott wrote admired and demanded descriptions, he was justified in describing. Moreover, every author shares inevitably to a great extent the tastes of his

age, or he would have little chance of living longer than his own life; the man who writes for posterity alone is tolerably certain of not reaching his audience. The origin of these temporary peculiarities in taste can sometimes be discovered, sometimes not, but in any case they must exist and manifest themselves in the writings of the period. Thus it is probable that Scott relished his own descriptions as much as his readers, and would have been surprised to learn that they needed any defense. It is well generally that abstract speculations should be controlled constantly by reference to the facts. So if we establish by arguments that seem sound to us, and perhaps are so, that certain things can not please in literature, and soon after find cultivated people admiring these very things, we may still be right, but it is prudent to look the ground over once more, and try to find out the explanation of such a surprising fact.

I shall attempt no explanation of the popularity of the detailed descriptions in Scott's novels, further than to say that it is probably connected with what is known as the romantic movement in literature. The revolt against the coldness and rigidity, or what was considered such, of the eighteenth century poets led to an attempt to return to nature, and it is not strange that it was sought to reproduce nature in books by every means, possible and impossible. The example of a great genius was naturally followed by others, and descriptions in novels came to be considered necessary and beautiful. It is worth noting that descriptions in poetry never became so well established, even among Scott's poetical followers; the vigor and movement which characterized the new school made them instinctively averse to otiose descriptions, and the healthier traditions on this point of the older school were not easily overthrown.

But perhaps these remarks may not be just; I certainly do not attach much weight to them, and cheerfully admit that they are only suggestions which need to be confirmed by further study. I take a very different course to satisfy myself. Certainly no way so good has yet been found to estimate the comparative worth of artistic productions, as the general consensus of opinion of cultivated men, especially when this opinion is that of several generations. Joseph de Maistre's definition of the beautiful, if not philosophically adequate, is a striking, and, I think, correct popular statement. *Le Beau, c'est ce qui plait au patricien eclaire*, the beautiful is what pleases the enlightened patrician, and we must look upon time and general consent as the most enlightened of patricians. Now Lessing's position, that poets, and prose writers whose aim is similar to that of poets, should not describe, is confirmed by the constant practice of those whom common consent pronounces the greatest writers. If therefore I find occasional violations of this law among them, or if some one of them persistently violates it, it means only, it can only mean, that he has given way to one of those impulses which befall all men and has lost control of his better judgment, or that he has followed the taste of his contemporaries. This last he is perfectly justified in doing, if only he does not knowingly sacrifice to popularity what is of vastly greater importance to himself and the world, the conscientiousness of the truth-loving artist. But we who are not his contemporaries need not think all he does a law to us. That this is the case of Walter Scott is shown by the unmerited neglect into which he has fallen, due partly at least to the descriptions, which the average novel reader finds slow, and which the more impartial man of culture finds uninteresting. And yet his better novels are in all

the higher literary qualities equal to any that ever were written, and in spite of all, will outlive those of any English novelist of this century, save perhaps two.

I will endeavor to summarize what I have said, and to draw such conclusions as it is possible to draw from it, and then I will close.

Lessing asserts that poets can not describe, by which he means, as his argument itself shows, that they can not paint and should not describe. The argument which he derives from the signs used in poetry, that as they are in succession of time, they can only describe what occurs in succession of time, is inconclusive, inasmuch as words are mere conventional symbols, not essential parts of poetry, and because also, such an argument, if valid, would prove that words can not describe in prose, which Lessing admits is possible and proper enough for didactic purposes. Words, therefore, can describe in succession of time; but a description, such as would serve as a guide for a painter, would not bring up an image to the mind at all comparable in vividness to that which the most ordinary sketch would give. For the mind is compelled laboriously to reconstruct the object after the description is complete by putting together the several parts which have been necessarily separated in the description, while the eyes see the object at once as a whole, and we can retain the impression of the whole while we review the parts. Whenever then a poet wishes to paint an object, let him not suppose that a description will accomplish his end.

But there may be circumstances where a mental picture of an object is not what he seeks to give, and here it may be wise and in strict accord with the law here laid down to describe. But the objections to describing apply even here; a description, just because it is one, fails to do what

See page



poets should do chiefly, and can only be justified by an overwhelming necessity.

What, then, is left to the poet? To paint successively what the eye sees successively, that is, action, movement. But he is not, therefore, shut out from everything but movement, for though he can not paint objects, he is still able to give an idea of them, not, to be sure, so vivid as the painter can give, but sometimes nearly as effective. This can be done in several ways, all however depending upon the same general principle, that of changing the coexistent in space into the successive in time. So the object described can be represented as moving, or the beholder represented as moving while looking at it, beauty can be transformed into charm, the effect upon those who see it can be noted, etc. Moreover in works of any considerable length, as the use of single epithets can be objected to on no theory, and Lessing expressly advises it, an image may finally be formed in the mind equal in vividness to any that words can give, by the constant iteration of different descriptive epithets. In a somewhat similar way, by substituting movement for action, lyric poetry may be brought within the range of Lessing's definition. Thus, even in this respect, the poet is not so far behind the painter as the strict application of Lessing's law might seem to involve, while his field is vastly wider, embracing, as Hegel says, all spiritual and natural things, events, histories, deeds, actions, inner and outer conditions.

Lessing said that he would not place much confidence in his formal deduction, if he had not found his conclusions confirmed by the practice of Homer; he might have added, of all great poets, and it would have held good to-day as well as one hundred and twenty-five years ago. The exceptions are few, and can be ascribed with confi-

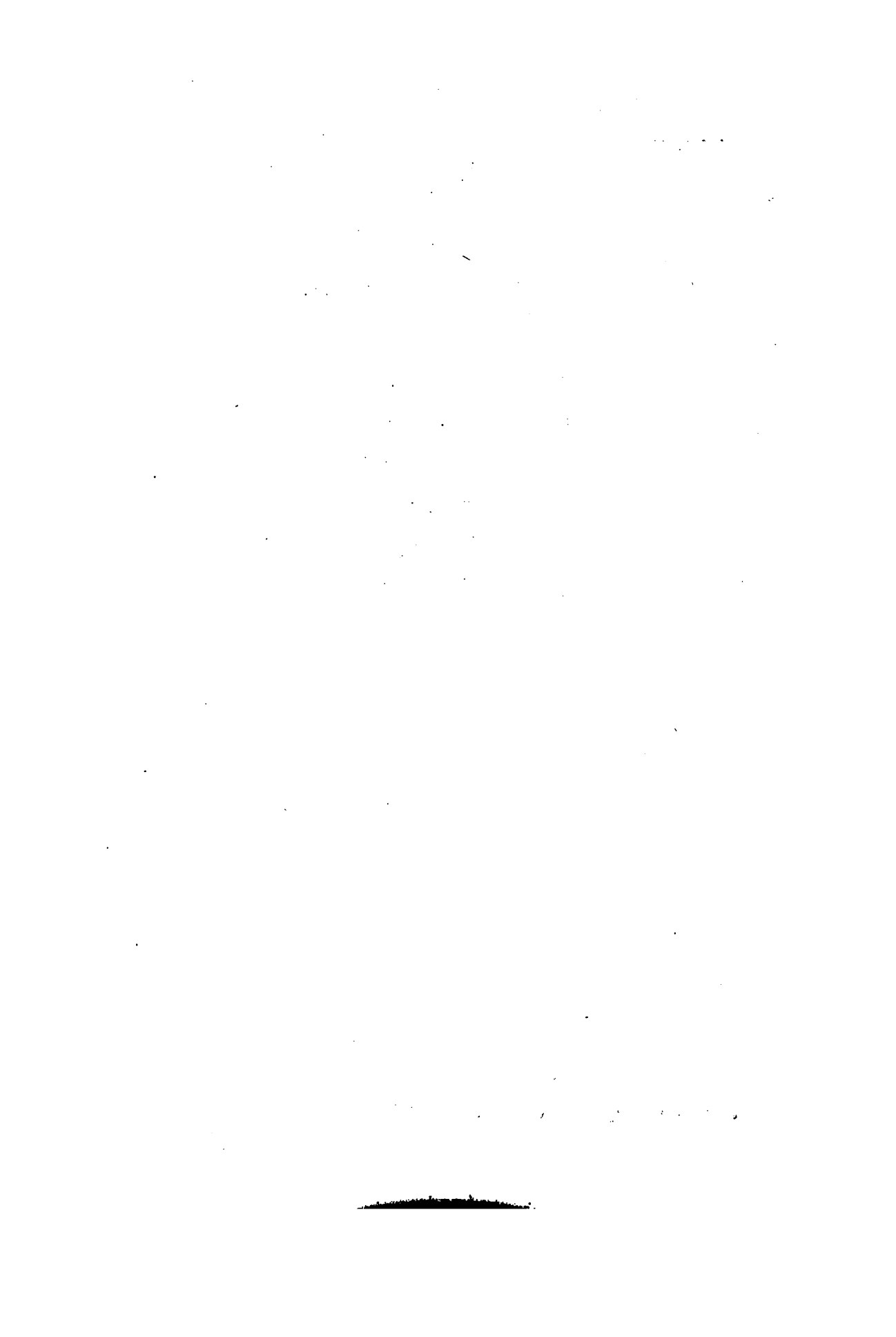
dence either to momentary forgetfulness of the needs of self-restraint, or to the prevailing taste of the age, in which geniuses share as much as other men, or even more than other men, precisely because they are geniuses. And these exceptions have not met with that long-continued approbation of the best minds which is upon the whole the surest test of merit. It is interesting to note that of the three poets from whom Lessing quotes descriptions to condemn them, Haller is now generally unknown outside of Germany except to the special student, Ariosto still retains his place as one of the great figures of Italian literature, but it is safe to say that his Alcina, in painting whom he spends some forty lines, is popularly known as a sorceress, not as a beautiful woman, that is, known for what she does, not for what she is; Virgil, the most graceful of poets, finds excuse even in Lessing's eyes for his descriptions, but the excuse justifies the man, not the poet.

This is the substance of what I had to say on Lessing's famous law. I can only repeat what I said in the beginning, that all subsequent discussion, so far as I am acquainted with it, has served only to strengthen the correctness of the main position. If some modifications have been necessary in the too absolute statements of the original proposition, they have not touched the essential part of it. Still it remains true that succession of time is, if not the only, certainly the only proper field for the poet. If he deserts that, he does so at his peril, and all experience shows that he will suffer for it. //

Let me recall, in closing, the admirable lines in which Lessing's theory is expounded by Matthew Arnold, a poet who unites to high poetical gifts and wide poetical sympathies, a critical insight which is rare among his brother poets.

Behold at last the poet's sphere !  
 But who, I said, suffices here ?  
 For, ah ! so much he has to do :  
 Be painter and musician too !  
 The aspect of the moment show,  
 The feeling of the moment know !  
 The aspect not, I grant, express  
 Clear as the painter's art can dress ;  
 The feeling not, I grant, explore  
 So deep as the musician's lore—  
 But clear as words can make revealing,  
 And deep as words can follow feeling.  
 But, ah ! then comes his sorest spell  
 Of toil—he must life's movement tell !  
 The thread which binds it all in one,  
 And not its separate parts alone.  
 The *movement* he must tell of life,  
 Its pain and pleasure, rest and strife ;  
 His eye must travel down, at full,  
 The long, unpausing spectacle ;  
 With faithful unrelaxing force  
 Attend it from its primal source,  
 From change to change and year to year  
 Attend it of its mid career.  
 Attend it to the last repose  
 And solemn silence of its close.  
 . . . . .  
 Only a few the life-stream's shore,  
 With safe unwandering feet explore ;  
 Untired its movement bright attend,  
 Follow its windings to the end.  
 Then from its brimming waves, their eye  
 Drinks up delighted ecstasy,  
 And its deep-toned, melodious voice  
 For ever makes their ear rejoice.  
 They speak ! the happiness divine  
 They feel, runs o'er in every line ;  
 Its spell is round them like a shower ;  
 It gives them pathos, gives them power.

No painter yet hath such a way,  
Nor no musician made, as they,  
And gathered on immortal knolls  
Such lovely flowers for cheering souls.  
Beethoven, Raphael, cannot reach  
The charm which Homer, Shakespeare, teach.  
To these, to these, their thankful race  
Gives, then, the first, the fairest place ;  
And brightest is their glory's sheen,  
For greatest hath their labour been.



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